

**Appropriations Committee
Health Subcommittee
February 24, 2022**

**Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Developmental Services/Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services)**

Good afternoon/evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Geoff Crandall and I am the Director of Programs at Kuhn Employment Opportunities, Inc. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

Kuhn provides employment and day program support to nearly 400 individuals annually through programs funded by the Department of Developmental Services and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. I'm here tonight to ask you to honor the long term plan to address underfunding of community nonprofits and increase funding this year by an additional \$461 million, or 8% in total for FY23.

This funding is needed now more than ever. Without it, we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities.

At the same time, we're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff of all skill levels and salaries.

Human services are now in competition with companies like Amazon and Walmart that require no specialized training, are paying more and offering more hiring incentives.

Our staff working to locate independent community employment for the individuals we serve are very conscious of this fact as they regularly assist individuals to locate jobs at employers where pay is equal to or greater than their own. Staff are often torn between continuing to work in a job they enjoy doing work they feel makes a difference or moving into a higher paying position in an industry where they know they will not be as happy, but which may allow them to stop working a second job, get out of debt or afford necessities for their families.

The increase in this year's budget, while very much appreciated, has quickly been absorbed by rising costs. Over the last year, inflation rose by almost six percent, surpassing the COLA in the current year's budget.

In our DDS funded programs we provide many individuals with transportation to and from our location as well as to their community worksites. Rising gas prices have greatly impacted the cost of providing this support. We have also been attempting to replace some of the older vehicles in our

fleet, but a lack of inventory in the used vehicle market has led to prices that are \$10,000 or more above what we paid for similar vehicles in recent years.

Nonprofit Providers funded by the Department of Developmental Services are grateful for the efforts of the Appropriations Committee and Governor Lamont to address wage and funding issues specific to services for the Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities population. Last year's Group Home Settlement provided significant funding to increase the minimum wage for direct support staff in DDS agencies.

However, the group home settlement also created significant challenges:

First, the terms of the settlement provided wage increases of as much as 11.6% for entry level staff, which next year will increase to 14.5%. But the agreement only provides a 3% increase to everyone else. Staff who before July were making only slightly above the new minimum, often people who had years or decades of experience or managing other staff, found themselves suddenly paid almost the same as a new hire.

- Second, the funding dedicated a pool of dollars to enhance employee benefits, but to date none of that funding has been disbursed to providers. We understand it to total less than half what providers have told DDS they would need.

While our long time staff are grateful for the salary increases they received they are also very aware and understandably concerned about the fact that they are now earning a wage that is close to or equal to what new employees earn. This leaves staff feeling that their experience and dedication is not respected and to begin to reconsider whether they can continue to work in a field where they are earning the same wage as a newly hired employee after ten or more years with our agency.

Please also support the following proposals by Governor Lamont from the American Rescue Plan Act for DDS:

- \$5 million in FY23 for infrastructure improvements for public and privately-owned camps.
- \$5 million in FY23 to provide additional recreational and leisure opportunities to facilitate socialization and connections as the state emerges from the pandemic.

The Governor's proposed budget also supports new behavioral health services and initiatives, for which we are thankful, but it does not provide support to existing programs that are struggling to keep up with the demand for services. **We urge the Appropriations Committee to fight for funding for these programs by implementing The Alliance's plan for a \$461 million increase.**

The Governor's budget does propose several new programs for which we urge your support, including

- Expanding Mobile Crisis services to be available 24/7 using ARPA funding, which will be important especially as the state rolls out 9-8-8.
- 26 new community placements from CVH and Whiting
- Funding to place peer support specialists in Connecticut's 12 busiest hospitals. This will improve the connection to services of people who are hospitalized with a mental health crisis or who go to the emergency room. It is important to note, however, that this program will increase referrals to existing community programs, and increase in demand which is not funded in the proposed budget.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my feedback

Sincerely,

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